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ABSTRACT

Saltville, Virginia, is a former company town whose main employer, a soda ash plant, shut down on July 1, 1971. The closure of the chemical plant displaced 700 workers, and created a crisis that threatened not only the existence of the town, but of the entire region. In response, Virginia Highlands Community College (VHCC), in cooperation with the town, opened the Job Preparedness Center (JPC) in Saltville on July 19, 1971. The Center targeted the 56% of plant workers with less than a high school education, and was designed to offer individualized instruction in the basic skills of reading, communication, and mathematics -- all essential for the high school equivalency exam. The first challenge was convincing displaced workers the importance of obtaining a GED; the second was convincing them they were capable of the task. Eighteen months after opening, however, 50 GED candidates had received a diploma, and by the time the center closed in 1973, more than 300 had participated in JPC programs. Today, Saltville dreams of developing a tourism industry. Plans are underway for a paleoecological museum, theater, and arts center. Saltville has been identified as a Superfund cleanup site and remediation should be complete in 1995. As the mayor at the time of the shutdown had predicted, Saltville is better off now than if it had remained a company town. (KP)

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